

FILE NO.: 17619

## ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE VALUE

UNION BUILDING GROUP  
ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY  
VICTORIA DRIVE  
ADELAIDE

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### DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE

The site comprises a group of structures collectively known as the Union Buildings. These include the Georgian style Lady Symon and George Murray Buildings, Western Annexe and cloisters (1920s-30s), and the multi-level Union House (completed in 1975) which contains the Union Bookshop, refectories, Little Theatre and cinema, bar, bistro, gallery and club offices.

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### STATEMENT OF HERITAGE VALUE

This group of buildings represents two major stages of development for the Adelaide University Union to provide services and facilities for students on campus. The earlier Georgian buildings designed by Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne-Smith reflect the influence that firm had on the built character of the university campus. These subsequently provided the parameters for the structure and design of Union House, noted for the quality of its internal spaces and its relationship to the earlier buildings. Significant also for the use of timber in large-scale structures and in its high level of building craftsmanship, Union House is considered to be the culmination of a series of buildings in the 1960s-70s by the prominent South Australian partnership of Dickson and Platten which developed a 'vernacular' adaptation of modernism.

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### RELEVANT CRITERIA (Under Section 16 of the *Heritage Act 1993*)

- e) it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment or is an outstanding representative of particular construction techniques or design characteristics.

Winner of several architectural awards, including the 1975 RAI Award of Merit, the Adelaide University Union redevelopment is considered to be one of the best examples of its time of architectural integration between old and new structures.

In 1981 a Civic Trust panel described the project as:

A large and complex building fitted skilfully into a steep and difficult site among older buildings. The new work is integrated with the old by careful matching of materials, roof pitches and external column spacing, and the bulk is minimised by balconies and

south side wall setbacks. Durable finishes of pleasant appearance produce relaxed spaces in which students obviously feel comfortable!

Warburton, p. 53

The new building (Union House) is noted for its quality of design and finishes combining scale, materials and textures, such as exposed brickwork and off form concrete, with innovative use of structural elements, such as timber roof trussing. The whole is finished with a high degree of craftsmanship.

This redevelopment is considered to be the culmination of an architectural idiom developed by the architects Dickson & Platten over a period of some ten years. Originating at a domestic scale, their 'vernacular' form of modernism was developed through a series of award winning designs, including many houses, the Arkaba Hotel Restaurant at Fullarton and Kathleen Lumley College at North Adelaide.

Dickson & Platten were one of the chief proponents in South Australia of the move away from the 'flat-roofed, glass-walled box towards a more relaxed and friendly form of modernism' during the 1960s and 1970s (Apperley et al, p. 248).

**g) it has special association with the life or work of a person or organisation or an event of historical importance.**

The Students' Union of the Adelaide University was formed in 1895, nearly two decades after the university commenced its academic work in 1876 (Duncan & Leonard, p. 58). Established to provide extra-curricular activities and services to students, the Union played an important cultural and social role in the life of the university.

Growth in student numbers is reflected in the various stages of development of Union accommodation on the campus. The Georgian style Lady Symon and George Murray buildings, cloisters and refectory, constructed between 1927 and 1938, accommodated a rapid rise in student enrolments in the two decades after the First World War. Designed by the notable Adelaide architectural firm of Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne-Smith, the Lady Symon building was the second of the firm's major commissions on campus, and with its subsequent additions is a significant contributor to the character of the northern edge of the campus. The firm had earlier designed the Darling Building and went on to design the George Murray Building as well as the Barr Smith Library, Johnson Laboratories, Benham Building and Bonython Hall. Hence the Union buildings have a special association with the harmonious character of the campus created in the Inter-War period and the important architectural firm which created that character.

Their Union building complex was in turn to provide the basis for the next major redevelopment for the Union in the form of the buildings designed by Dickson & Platten and built between 1969 and 1975.

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## BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### *The Adelaide University Union*

On 26 April 1895 a public meeting was held on the University campus with the aim of considering the formation of a proposed Adelaide University Union. As a result of the meeting the Adelaide University Union Society was formed. Its aims were to promote candidates for Council, present papers on issues topical to the university, coordinate sporting clubs and student accommodation and promote social activities for members (Finnis, p. 45). Changing its name in May 1895 to the Adelaide University Union, the organisation was housed in the 'Union Room', located behind the Mitchell Building, from 1897 to 1913 (Dickson, p. 6).

Although the Union had established a building committee in 1896, it was not until March 1921 that a definite scheme and costings for a new building were submitted to the University (Finnis, p. 114). This submission was met with the suggestion by the then Vice-Chancellor, Sir William Mitchell, that the first duty of the graduates was to acknowledge the services rendered by the university during the First World War by erecting a monument to their 'fallen comrades' (Finnis, p. 114). However there was an 'imperative need to provide for a building for a students Union which should include a dining hall capable of holding 500 to 600 at a time, a debating hall of similar dimensions, a wing for the women's union and other rooms' (Finnis, p. 116).

Plans and cost estimates prepared by the architect Walter Bagot of Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne-Smith were presented to a General Meeting of the Union in July 1921. The selection of a suitable site was subsequently discussed, as was the need to raise funds for the building project, an issue which was to have significant impact on the progress of the project (Finnis, p. 117, 127).

The need for additional accommodation was by this time being sorely felt by the Union. Student enrolments had increased relatively slowly from 1876 to 1894 when they reached 280. However by 1904 enrolments had reached 964 and in the decade 1914-1924 enrolments rose from 1044 to 2018 (Duncan & Leonard, p. 188).

It was not until August 1926 that sufficient funds became available when Sir Josiah Symon donated £10,000 for the erection of the proposed Women's Union Building, requesting that it be named the Lady Symon Building (Finnis, p. 127). A suitable site had not yet been selected, but after the University acquired 'the fine strip of land facing Victoria Drive' (formerly occupied by the old shunting line which ran from the Adelaide Railway Station to the Exhibition Building) in 1927, part of this land was allocated to the Union and building work began immediately (Finnis, p. 127; Dickson, p. 6). In the same year a public appeal for funds was launched and a pamphlet prepared outlining the proposed works, which comprised:

an interesting formal arrangement of buildings around the Cloisters – the two student centres, the Lady Symon and a future Men's building with the Cloisters, an open sided square linked by the unbroken rank of War Memorial Cloisters with the central lawn. The space was contained on three sides: on the south by the Refectory (later to be called the Helen Mayo Refectory after the most distinguished university woman)

including Entry and Shops and living quarters; on the east an Annexe comprising a Shop and Graduates Room; a wall closed the west side.

Dickson, p. 6

The foundation stone of the first part of the complex, the Lady Symon Building, was laid by Sir Josiah Symon on 25 October 1927 (Finnis, p. 129). With funds provided by the appeal, work was also able to commence on the Refectory and part of the memorial cloisters. All of these structures were opened by Sir Josiah Symon on 2 March 1929 (Finnis, p. 135). The builder was H S C Jarvis (BRG 18/55).

A shortage of funds prevented further work on the remainder of the complex (the Men's Union building and north and east cloisters) and it was not until 1936 that the necessary funds were made available. The Union's paper, *On Dit*, reported on 23 September 1936 that the Chancellor, Sir George Murray, had donated £10,000 for completion of the Men's building (Finnis, p. 147). C H Martin Ltd were given the contract for the works and the foundation stone of the George Murray Building was laid by George Murray on 20 May 1937 and the opening of this building in March 1938 completed the original stage of the complex (BRG 18/55; Dickson, p. 7).

These buildings were designed during a time when Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne-Smith were the architects to the University. This firm was to imprint a degree of refined harmony on the university campus, designing a number of buildings for the university from the 1920s to the 1940s. Their first was the Darling Building, completed in 1922, with the Barr Smith Library (1930), Mitchell Gates and Johnson Laboratory (1933) and Bonython Hall (1936) built in the interval between the construction of the Lady Symon Building and the George Murray Building. The Benham Building, completed in 1940, was also designed by these architects (BRG 18/55). Their influence on the built character of the university campus today is summarised by Michael Page:

Bagot always fought for congruity in the University buildings. Those erected during his time as University Architect . . . all show this striving towards congruity and an attempt to create an assembly of buildings which would have some flavour of the ancient traditions of learning. He was saddened by the explosion of 'education factories' around the Adelaide campus after the second World War, in that period when the rate of building could hardly keep pace with the number of entrants.

Page, p. 146

With a rapid increase in student numbers (from 2,728 in 1944 to 4,115 in 1954 and doubling to 8,634 in 1964) came the need for further accommodation for the Union and work was undertaken between 1955 and 1962. This included construction of the Wills Refectory, the Western Annexe (offices for the Union and Sports Association), the Upper Refectory and a second floor on the Eastern Annexe (Dickson, p. 7).



### ***Redevelopment of the Union Complex***

The newly formed Australian Universities Commission rejected a proposition from the Union to build a refectory at the upper level of the southwest corner of the site and a common room located on the lawn area just to the north of the cloisters (Dickson, p. 1, 7). This prompted the Union to re-assess their requirements and consider redevelopment of the site as a whole (Dickson, p. 2).

At the Union Council meeting on 22 June 1967 it was agreed to engage the services of Dickson and Platten Architects on an hourly basis and on 19 July 1967 they were formally commissioned to prepare sketch designs of modifications to the Union buildings (Dickson, p. 7, 8).

A two stage approach was proposed by the architects. The first stage was to comprise the reconstruction and extension of the southern area of the site to give three levels of accommodation over the full area and two levels for plant above. The second stage was to replace the original single storey Mayo building with a building of several levels linking the stage one levels and the proposed new bookshop (*Architecture Australia*).

The constraints on the project were considerable. The retention of the northern cloisters and the George Murray and Lady Symon Buildings was paramount; a five metre high escarpment bisected the site and the Union required that its facilities be kept in use throughout the construction period (*Architecture Australia*; Dickson *passim*).

Development of a master plan for the project and sketch plans for Stage 1 began in early 1969 and were completed by June, when detailed design and documentation for Stage 1 began. As construction was to commence in the Christmas vacation period (to minimise disruption to Union activities) only a few months were available for documentation for the first stage before tenders were called in September (Dickson, p. 14, 17).

Stage 1 comprised the works south of what is now the Mayo Refectory and included two refectories (Wills and Upper), games room, club offices, kitchen, plant rooms and the bookshop. Most of the major issues were resolved during this stage of the works, in particular that of the provision of services to the complex. The bookshop required some additional work to resolve issues arising from both internal and external requirements (Dickson, p. 25).

Tenders for Stage 1 were called in September 1969 and the contract was subsequently let to Hansen and Yuncken (Dickson, p. 28). Stage 1 was completed in May 1971 (Dickson, p. 35).

Preliminary designs for Stage 2 were completed in September 1972 and the work went to tender early in 1973 (Dickson, p. 35, 38). Fricker Brothers were the contractors for Stage 2 (Warburton, p. 53). Stage 2 contained the less utilitarian facilities of the complex and the design and construction processes were simpler as

most of the planning and problems had been resolved through Stage 1. Stage 2 included the Little Theatre, cinema, bistro, craft studio, bar, gallery and Mayo Refectory.

The total cost of the project was \$2.7 million (*Architecture Australia*).

From the beginning of the design process for the Union redevelopment, Robert Dickson was acutely aware of the need to establish harmonious relationships between new and old structures and saw the project as a challenging and exciting architectural opportunity. He later summarised his personal design philosophy at the time:

I felt privileged to be given the opportunity to redevelop the Union Buildings, to relate the new work to that of the talented architects Walter Bagot and Louis Laybourne Smith. I saw it as a challenge to achieve harmonious relationships with the fine old buildings. Preserving the scale of the early load-bearing brick buildings was a prime concern, particularly as it was necessary to use frame construction to accommodate the larger scale of the new spaces. I considered it was essential for the new work to be in the architectural idiom of my own generation. I felt no need to compromise my solutions, nor did I feel I was compromising the old work. The Union redevelopment project presented a unique opportunity for the expression of architecture as a continuing tradition. I believe that each generation must be free to utilise the techniques available, solving its problems in a direct manner, with integrity, yet endeavouring to observe good architectural manners in relationships.

Dickson, p. 44

This design philosophy was directly reflected in the fabric of the new Union building.

The domestic scale of the original Union buildings, in particular the cloisters, dictated the scale and structure of the new work. The structural spacing was influenced by the existing cloisters and exposed columns were designed to match the scale of the cloister columns. Exposed concrete was given a finely textured finish by the use of plywood formwork and concrete colour carefully selected to closely match the colour and texture of the existing render (Dickson, p. 20, 33).

Bricks and roof tiles were carefully selected to match the existing and the rugged finishes to the interiors were chosen for practical reasons. The building was designed to accommodate both natural and mechanical climate control: the use of windows for ventilation, shades and screens and Solomit compressed straw ceiling panels in the upper level spaces and bookshop formed the basis of natural climate control (Dickson, p. 20-22).

The treatment of the roofs was considered vital to establishing relationships between the old and new work and roof slopes had to be compatible. Long spanning roof frames and floor beams were used to reduce the extent of new structural elements. Exposed timber trusses were used in the games room, club office area and bookshop, with tubular steel roof trusses in the cinema (Dickson, p. 22; *Architecture Australia*).



The Adelaide University Union Bookshop received a Citation from the RAIA (SA Chapter) when it was completed and Union House won the RAIA (SA Chapter) Award of Merit in 1975 (*Architecture Australia*; Dickson, p. 46). The complex was also given a Civic Trust Award in 1981 (Warburton, p. 53).

In giving the Award of Merit to Union House in 1975, the SA Chapter jury said:

The architects stated that their 'principal objective was to achieve harmony with the existing buildings but without imitating their architectural style'. This objective has been admirably achieved in terms of scale, materials and texture.

The building is used by some 8,000 people. It houses a variety of seemingly disparate functions with a multitude of large and small spaces. Yet the 10,000 square metres or so have been disposed of in a way which emphasises human scale and informality, appropriate to the intensive use of a day to day basis. The multitude of entrances expresses these objectives further.

The structure and materials again reinforce this idea and are skilfully contributing to the whole as to the areas immediately outside the building proper – balconies and terraces. The stair and ramp complex on the south east corner exemplifies this principle with sculptural elegance.

The building speaks a clear, coherent language which is consistent throughout.

There seemed a tremendous deliberateness about large-scale and small-scale decisions made in the building. Nearly every piece of form, structure, functional relationship and detail seemed carefully considered and belonging to the overall scheme.

Some of the larger spaces with the timber trussed ceilings are a credit to the collaboration and communication between architect and engineer.

*Architecture Australia*, February/March 1976

### ***Dickson & Platten Architects***

Robert Dickson was the project architect for the Union redevelopment. He had studied architecture with his future colleague Newell Platten, and worked part time in the practice of Hassell & McConnell before travelling overseas to work in Milan and London. Of the larger practices in Adelaide, Hassell & McConnell was one of the two recognised proponents of modern architecture at the time. The other was Cheesman & Doley (with whom Newell Platten first worked). On returning to Adelaide in 1957, Dickson established his own practice and in July 1958 joined with Platten to form Dickson & Platten (Page, p. 204; Dickson, p. 46).

Individual houses were the principal work of the early practice. Their design was based on close site relationships, simple planning, economical use of materials and construction, innovative detail and low energy considerations. Some 60 to 70 houses, including additions, and small flats were constructed. The concerns for human scale

and relationships demonstrated in their residential work had a significant influence on the design approach to larger projects.

Dickson, p. 46

These larger projects, nearly all of which were recognised by awards given by the RAIA (SA Chapter), were to illustrate the progress of a particular 'vernacular' style of modernism in South Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s.

They included National Fitness Council Camp developments at Mylor and O'Sullivan's Beach, the Mount Lofty (1968) and Blackwood Golf Clubs, and the Arkaba Hotel Restaurant (1965), Fullarton, which gave the architects an 'opportunity to develop on a larger scale some of the design philosophies worked out on individual houses.' (Page, p. 237). Designed and constructed within very short time schedules, the Arkaba Restaurant won the 1965 Award of Merit. Two townhouses (1966) in MacKinnon Parade, North Adelaide were to win the 1967 Award of Merit and the Kathleen Lumley Post-Graduate College (1969) also achieved the Award of Merit in 1969.

A small scale office building for Associated Securities Limited on Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide, which won a Citation in 1972, was undertaken by the architects in the period between the first and second stages of the Adelaide University Union Redevelopment. Also to win Awards of Merit were the Salisbury Civic Centre and a water filtration plant at Hope Valley (1976) (designed by Robert Dickson & Associates) which followed the Union redevelopment (Dickson, p. 46; *Building & Architecture*).

In 1973 Newell Platten had taken up a position as Chief Design Architect with the South Australian Housing Trust, and the practice continued as Robert Dickson & Associates and later Robert Dickson Architects (Dickson, p. 46).

Dickson & Platten were commissioned to undertake the University Union Redevelopment in 1967. It was to be one of their largest and most complex projects and provided the architects with the challenge of incorporating their design philosophies with the older buildings on site. Robert Dickson summarised their design approach to the redevelopment:

I have always felt that architecture should be 'of its time'. No attempt would be made to compromise the architectural character or treatment of the new work, by copying the forms or detail of the older buildings. Rather the old and the new could gain from their contrasting character provided that good architectural manners were observed. The new architecture could best achieve this by having its own integrity. The architectural character should derive from direct resolution of particular needs, while demonstrating respect (and in this case genuine affection) for the harmonious balance and consistently pleasing detailing of the original buildings, which retain considerable heritage value – 'heritage' in both architectural and historical terms.

Dickson, p. 16



This approach was extremely successful and was rewarded with both a Citation and Award of Merit from the RAIA (SA Chapter).

The style of Dickson's work has been described as a 'relaxed and friendly form of modernism' (Apperley et al, p. 248) and the Union buildings are considered to be the most sophisticated example of the genre.

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## REFERENCES

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FILE NO.: 17619

## SITE RECORD

UNION BUILDING GROUP  
ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY  
VICTORIA DRIVE  
ADELAIDE

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**FORMER NAME**

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE** Adelaide University Union complex, including Union House, George Murray House, Lady Symon House, Western Annexe and Cloisters

**DATE OF COMPLETION** 1975

**REGISTER STATUS** Description Nominated  
Date 6 September 1999

**CURRENT USE** Description Tertiary Institution  
Dates 1929 - present

**PREVIOUS USE(S)** Description N/A  
Dates N/A

**ARCHITECT** Name Woods, Bagot, Jory & Laybourne Smith  
(1929 & 1937)  
Dickson & Platten; Robert Dickson & Associates (1971, 1975)

**BUILDER** Name H S C Jarvis (1929) & C H Martin Ltd  
(1937)  
Hansen & Yuncken (1971) & Fricker Brothers (1975)

**SUBJECT INDEXING** Group Education  
Category Tertiary Institution

**MISCELLANEOUS INDEX** N/A

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA** Description Adelaide

**LOCATION** Unit No.  
Street No.  
Street Name Victoria Drive  
Town/Suburb Adelaide  
Post Code 5000  
Region No. 1  
Region Name Adelaide City

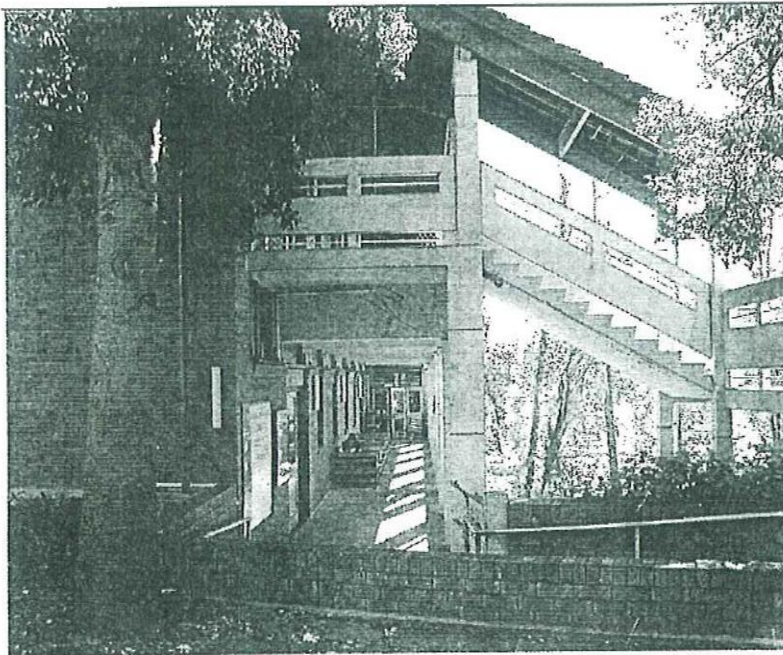
**LAND DESCRIPTION** Title Type CT  
Volume 5696  
Folio 851



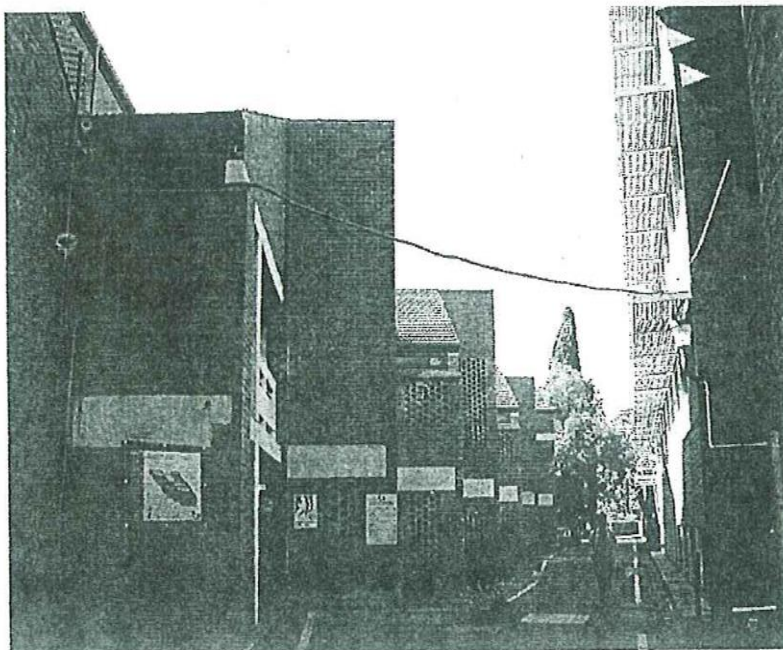
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## PHOTOGRAPHS

UNION BUILDING GROUP  
ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY  
VICTORIA DRIVE  
ADELAIDE



*Stairs, east elevation*



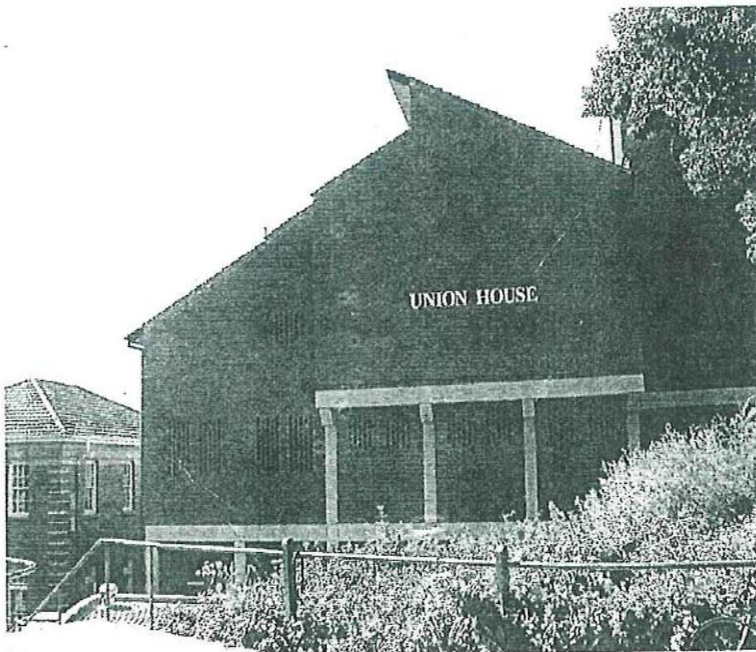
*South elevation*

FILE NO.: 17619

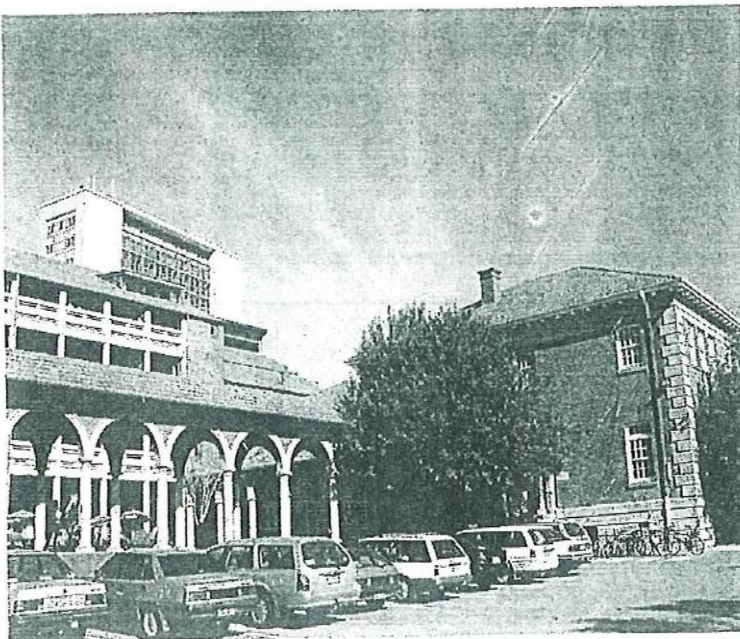
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*West elevation*



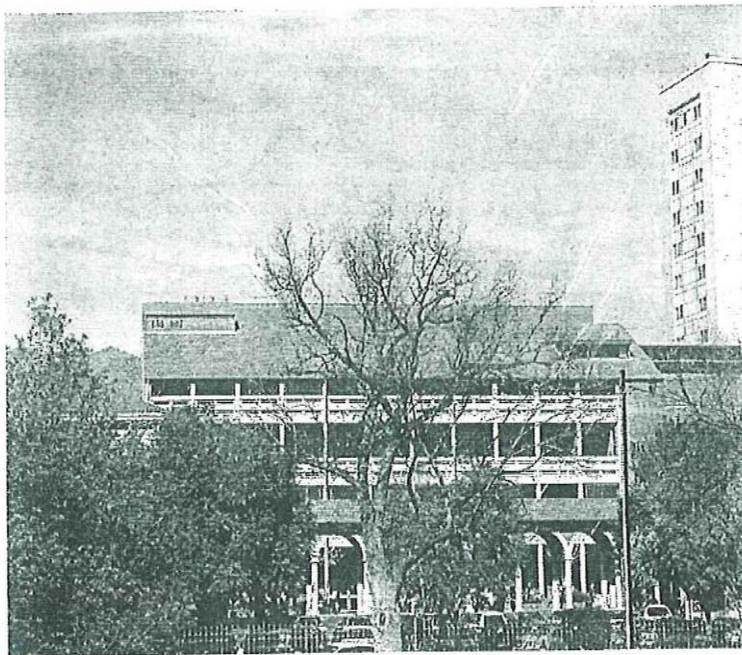
*Cloisters & Lady  
Symon Building*



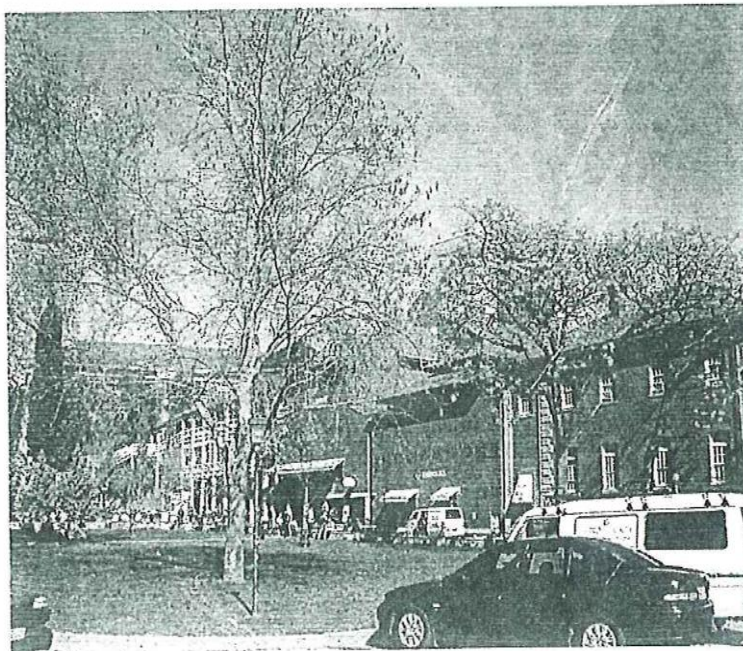
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## PHOTOGRAPHS

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*North elevation*



*East elevation*